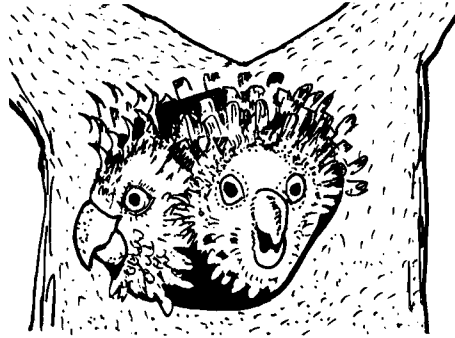


The Natural Choice



by Eb Cravens
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Parrots for Dollars: A Peek at Parrot Marketing

Of all the tasks associated with the American parrot trade, perhaps the most frustrating and difficult is the marketing of successfully raised psittacine babies.

We aviculturists can be extremely proud of the progress we have made the past decades in the production of hookbill offspring in captivity. Certainly, recent entries into the fascinating world of psittaculture owe a heartfelt "thank you" to the dedicated experts who have freely provided their wisdom and guidance that we may all be able to keep and raise exotic bird species.

Looking to the future, it appears we are entering a golden period when the availability of parrots to the hobbyist and pet owner may reach record proportions. Realistically, we cannot expect this to last very long as gene pools are shrinking before our very eyes. One of the highest goals of true

bird lovers is now being realized with the phasing out of commercial wild bird importation. Whether we like it or not, aviculturists can agree that the elimination of imported birds, now for the pet trade and later completely, is a mark of true unselfishness in a business fraught with moral and ethical dilemmas!

To quote a popular phrase, "We've come a long way, baby."

The implications for marketing domestic-raised parrots are profound. As more hobbyists and new breeders succeed and expand, seasonal species gluts and shortages are going to become increasingly common in the pet trade. Scarcely a week goes by at our shop without phone calls from small breeders who have exhausted their sales possibilities direct to the public and wish to ease their pressure and enter the wholesale market.

As a successful exotic bird shop,

Feathered Friends is encountering those who want us to buy their "extra babies" while they advertise locally at prices 25 to 50 percent lower than we can possibly retail. "Support your local bird shop" is becoming a rallying call amongst many pet store owners coping with rising rents, a sluggish luxury economy, and massive breeder advertising in national magazines.

To be sure, pet stores spend hours showing, explaining and troubleshooting for customers in the parrot trade. They push new products, answer medical questions and refer veterinarians, work to eliminate old-fashioned methods of feeding and caring for birds, and take much pressure off of breeders who face enough phone calls already!

We believe that the entire bird market is interconnected in a fragile network that makes it succeed at present. What's to come in the days ahead is anyone's guess. . . .

Supply and demand may cause havoc in some species. Many small breeding operations are only now beginning to realize significant numbers production. In two or three years, we expect to see increases in easy-to-breed and commonly imported species. However, if these birds do not meet acceptable home pet standards, the market will not accept the numbers. Such trends could lead to breeders "dumping" unwanted pairs on the market in favor of more saleable parrots.

Let us caution ourselves now. To "dump" any breeding pair because of difficult marketing is both unprofitable and detrimental to the entire avicultural industry. Short-sighted economic decisions do nothing for a stable market — nothing for a species we all thought desirable five or 10 years ago when we took thousands from the wilds. I praise the breeders I have met who have realized their dreams of breeding parrots and now devote 10 or 15 percent of their annual income to be used to maintain needy pairs of parrots whose offspring have very little saleability at all. God bless those who use imagination instead of strict fiscal decisions when appraising their aviary programs.

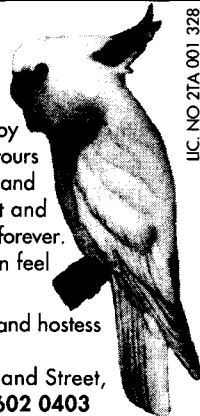
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handfed pets. Parent-raised psittacines are a growing market in the U.S. due to demand by new breeders. To date, there are many species in which parent-raised babies command a higher price than handfed pets. Add to this the decreased time demanded of keepers and it seems quite unwise for any aviary not to be widening its scope by teaching potential pairs to raise their own chicks the last clutch of the season.

Furthermore, parent raising fits well into the birds' natural cycle of nesting and resting. We expect future observations to substantiate theories that pairs allowed to raise some of their own babies will produce longer, more regularly, and shut down their systems annually to the betterment of their health. This practice will also provide America with a steady supply of savvy parent raised psittacines to begin taking over breeding duties as wild-caught stock disappears. Some breeders highly praise the combination of a wily parent raised cock and a calm, partially imprinted handfed hen as aviary producers.

The days of haphazardly keeping and breeding single pairs of many different species of hookbill are dying. Professional aviculturists recommend a minimum of three or four pairs of each species at each facility. From a marketing standpoint, it increases your chances of having babies to supply regular customers *every* year and offers the advantage of being able to supply two or three lines of unrelated handfed pairs for the growing number of hobbyists.

For those who feel able to specialize in a single species of bird, the difficulty of marketing becomes even less once a few suitable outlets are established. Remember, when choosing species for breeding programs, to consider all factors — size, noise, cost, difficulty of breeding, and, above all, love of that particular bird. I have learned over the years to temper my acquisitiveness and purchase only those parrots I feel bonded to and would personally own. That way, having a poor marketing season only means ending up with more breeding pairs of a favorite species.

Feathered Friends receives dozens of requests each year from those who wish to help aviculture by breeding endangered species. Our reply is to leave the CITES I and II parrots to the

experts and choose other, more affordable "peripheral species." Who is to say which Brotogeris, which Lorinae, which Aratinga, which Amazona are destined for endangerment beyond 1996? A simple glance at Joseph Forshaw's *Parrots of the World* distribution charts will tell you which species are clearly localized and therefore environmentally fragile!

Noted macaw breeder Barry Wold of Shingle Springs, California once remarked, "I measure success by how many generations of a species I have raised, not how many birds I raise each year." All aviculturists should recall how quickly a prolific breeding pair may die or stop producing. Be sure to keep back offspring from your best pairs, find unrelated mates and increase your insurance against the day when the parents are no longer there to give you babies. It cannot be emphasized too strongly; keep records, keep records, keep records!

A delightful movement among hobbyists is the choosing of special offspring with quiet characteristics, loving characteristics, or deep nesting instincts to hold back for next generation's parenting. I, too, believe observant breeders can distinguish which offspring have potential as top pets, which have more wild savvy. Are such tendencies present in the genes bestowed by the parents? Perhaps time will tell. Meanwhile, learn to breed for specifics, not for numbers. And if anyone comes up with a gene pool of *quiet* Nanday Conure babies, they will have no trouble marketing them!

Bob and Rosalie Snell, well respected breeders near Springfield, Missouri, note that many small aviculturists keep what they can't sell. "They

end up with the spraddle-legged babies or those with faults," they explained, "when they should be holding back the biggest and the best." Then U.S. aviculture can grow stronger and stronger by breeding the best to the best.

One of the first steps taken by those who successfully market their psittacines is to decide whether they wish to sell retail or wholesale. To walk the line and try to accomplish both essentially means maintaining two marketing programs with two sets of demands on time and energy. It also has the disadvantage of dividing one's focus and lessening the chances of paramount success in either area.

Retailers receive higher prices for their birds, must pay regular advertising fees, consider each sale a new customer, often must feed parrots different lengths of time before selling them, may get stuck with older less-manageable pets, and have to deal long-term with their pet owners' needs and questions.

Wholesalers receive lower prices for their birds, can sell them in groups or clutches, normally handfeed each chick only to a certain age, need advertise only when their production exceeds regular clients, and seldom if ever need to deal with individual pet owners.

(There is a third choice increasing across the country: aviculturists who support their hobby breeding with other income and desire only to keep, trade or give away their psittacine babies to adequate homes!)

Most of the wholesalers our shop patronizes take great pains to satisfy their regular customers who purchase thousands of dollars in parrots each year. The finest in the business do not

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require full payment in advance (once they have dealt with you), guarantee each baby against injury or trauma in shipping (or we ship it back at their expense), and occasionally will split the cost of a lost bird or offer a replacement. The wholesaler-buyer relationship is one of long-term mutual benefit based on trust and friendship.

As a shop, we protect the interests of our suppliers by ordering as many parrots as possible months in advance, by respecting their privacy where pet owners are concerned, and by not constantly price haggling or trying to find cheaper sources. We feel it would be foolish, for example, to try to always buy the least expensive cockatoos in a country rife with Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease. Once a source for clean, reliable cockatoos is located, we stick with it!

We choose to support local breeders as much as possible except in cases where they advertise excess babies in competition to us at prices we cannot hope to match. We pay little attention to the retail prices others in the U.S. seem to ask for their hookbills — instead choosing to base our price on the legitimate wholesale cost of the chicks. Buying babies in clutches allows us a discount we can often pass on to the pet owner.

The whole process is geared toward stability. The pet bird trade probably will never realize a national pricing index, but the true experts in the wholesale field can always state within \$50 or \$100 what a handfed baby is normally worth. Keeping prices somewhat stable has the added benefit of revealing abnormally cheap psittacines as potential faulty, stolen or smuggled birds. The longer I am in this business, the more strongly I believe a parrot buyer more or less gets what he or she pays for. One of the exceptions seems to be in that sought after realm of "proven pairs." Ah! The stories we could tell. . . . Proven pairs that turned out to be both female or, more likely, both male, clutchmates, incompatible, overage, sterile, or on loan to the seller. Seems the old Latin phrase "caveat emptor" serves many less than honest bird dealers well. If the source and buyer are not dinner-date close, they might want to get it in writing.

Some other ways to increase marketing capabilities include: trading for

unrelated babies to increase pair sales, sexing fledglings to determine hens in species where hens are in demand, and holding back birds to sell them as desirable two and three year olds. An area we hope begins to expand the next decade is the sale of domestic psittacines on the export market. Once U.S. breeders begin large scale production of species which command high prices overseas, the market may commence. Hopefully, by that time, official red tape and paperwork will have been scaled back to make export easier!

Also, breeders may increase their bird related incomes by marketing products it has taken them years to establish in their own breeding programs; and by writing and publishing more of the important discoveries they are making in day to day psittaculture.

I hear disgruntled murmurs amongst some established breeders these days. "We worked and researched and learned how to breed these birds," they say. "And we taught newcomers our ways. Now that they are producing chicks, they advertise in newspapers and throw chaos into the market by selling at low prices."

Certainly there are many newly arrived aviculturists on the American scene. They must realize that they have a responsibility not to wholesale over much to the pet public lest we all lose in the long run. However, the fact is many hobbyists have full-time jobs which have supported their families for years. When their backyard aviaries begin producing, they have no real need to get high prices for babies. Often they began doing this for their love and interest in birds. I know of several cases where breeders have been rudely harassed by other breeders for "underselling" parrot species such as Hawkheads, Capes, eclectus or Illiger's Macaws.

Clearly there is no room in U.S. aviculture for rude peer pressure. But what constitutes "underselling"? Supply and demand principles seem to dictate market prices. We have paid as little as \$145 for handfed Sun Conure chicks, as high as \$600. Last year there were U.S. Blue and Gold Macaw babies sold as low as \$350. Is the market any worse off because of it? I find it refreshing that a new generation of aviculturists is beginning to enter the pet trade with values totally unrelated to dollar profit. They do not seem to

begrudge us our opinions; and they are obviously going to make us streamline our operations for optimum results.

No longer should we be housing single unmated exotics in our cages, consuming food and time while they live out their lives. Certainly, in the case of rarer species, every cock or hen kept singly is a blot against its keeper. Cooperation, trust and generosity are our goals of the future in aviculture. Breeder loans, exchanges and outright gifts are our way of paying back avian species for the joy and profits they have offered us.

Any close evaluation of a facility will reveal single birds or unproductive pairs which cost their keepers money, but give back nothing to the business. Passing such pairs on to another breeder will increase time and efficiency in an aviary. Sometimes geographical climate alone makes it inevitable that some species will fail to produce in your care. Admission of such limitations is no failure. Failure is keeping the birds year after year in an unproductive state until they die.

Expert aviculturist Fred Bauer of Humboldt County, California, related this story about his aviaries, "I have the past few years moved from my aviary two of my favorite parrot species — five pairs of Cape Parrots and all my Black Cap Lorries which I have been breeding for 18 years. It was one of the most difficult decisions I ever made. But the weather here made it impossible to produce the numbers I felt were needed. My philosophy has always been the needs of the bird species come first. If the parrots are not happy here, I pass them on. They are breeding better already."

"Yes, I miss them," Bauer added, "I held onto them two years longer after I decided. I'm just glad I have the pictures and the feathers to remember them."

Plum-crowned Pionus, Purple-bellied Parrot, Brazilian Hawkhead, Blue-throated Conure, Red-vented and Gang Gang Cockatoos, to cite a few, have all suffered in captivity due to politics or personal ego taking precedence over fundamental avicultural principles.

Hopefully, the 1990s are bringing the realization that it is not what we each do that endures in aviculture — it is what we all do collectively. ●